



Michael and Jessica skip around puddles on slickrock in Moab, Utah.

BARE YOUR SOLE

WHO SAID YOU NEEDED SHOES TO RUN? YOU JUST NEED YOUR FEET.

In 2007, Jessica Lee ran the Bolder Boulder 10K in Colorado, US, and felt crippled with knee pain after the first 3km. Discouraged, she decided to give up the sport and focus on cycling instead. "Running felt like a chore," says Jessica.

Then she met Michael Sandler in May 2009 and became inspired to try the sport again. Michael, a former cyclist and author of *Barefoot Running*, introduced her to the painless, joyous experience of running without shoes. He had broken his hip and shattered his thigh bone in an inline skating accident in 2006, and doctors warned he may not walk again, much less run. "They were right," he says, "until I decided to go barefoot."

On her first try, Jessica covered 200m barefoot and "felt like a kid again". Three months later, running longer and faster than ever before, she started the Boulder Barefoot Running Club. Then, in November 2009, she quit her job as a marketing professional and co-founded RunBare Company with Michael, touring the world to spread the word about the benefits of going barefoot.

The pair – who got married in October last year – shared their experience in Singapore recently at a clinic organised by barefoot shoe company Terra Plana. Here's why you should ditch your shoes too.

Even well-cushioned shoes don't protect you from impact.

Up to 75 per cent of regular runners each year suffer repetitive stress injuries, despite advancements in shoe cushioning and support. In fact, it is because of cushioning that three in four runners who wear shoes land on their heels, concentrating two to three times their body weight on to a coin-sized surface, causing painful and potentially damaging impact, says Daniel Lieberman, a professor of human evolutionary biology. In his study published in the

journal *Nature*, he found that most barefooted runners land on the sides or balls of their feet – just like kids do – distributing the impact forces across a wider platform, hence reducing the chance of injury.

Bare feet promote healthy – and sexy – feet and legs.

Because naked feet are free to stretch and not confined in shoes, the toes have space to spread apart and straighten out. "When I met Michael, he pointed out that I had bunions," says Jessica. "After three months, they diminished. My big toe straightened out." Running barefoot also works the calf muscles harder, making them more sculpted – perfect for flaunting in those Jimmy Choos.

It also strengthens the plantar fascia muscles that run along the sole of the foot, and reduces the chance of shin splints, says Robert Gotlin, director of orthopaedic and sports rehabilitation at Beth Israel Medical Centre in New York City.

Your feet won't become ugly (contrary to belief).

"After spending a few months going barefoot, you'll actually develop more squishy padding in the sole," says Jessica. "Your skin thickens, but

remains soft and pliable." If you go for pedicures, don't buff off the skin at the bottom of your feet. And if you do moisturise, wait a while before going out for your run.

Run faster, longer and better than ever.

Running without shoes, says Christopher McDougall, author of *Born To Run*, is the most efficient way of learning how to run properly, with a biomechanically-efficient running stride. (That means you'll post a personal best at the *Shape Run* in July!) Without cushioning, you are more likely to run the way you were born to – on your forefoot. "Once you learn good form," says Christopher, "you can wear any shoe you want."

Find your love for running (even if you hate it now).

Christopher used to be plagued with injuries, thought running was "a stupid thing" and gave it up for good. Then in 2006, he met the Tarahumara – a Mexican tribe renowned for running long distances (like 700km in two days) in sandals and without injury – who taught him to run pain-free, lightly and gently on the balls of his feet. Now, he's 18kg lighter and runs almost every day.

GRIN AND BARE IT!

HERE IS HOW TO EASE INTO BAREFOOT RUNNING SAFELY.

- **TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES.** "When you feel the ground and try to heel-strike, it will hurt and you will stop, preventing an overuse injury," says Michael. **uncomfortable, change it. Stop if it's painful,"** says Christopher. "When you become fatigued and your form starts falling apart, that's your body telling you to pack it in today."
- **PICK A HARD SURFACE.** "The harder the better," says Michael. "It's easier to feel the ground, and to learn to run incredibly light."
- **TAKE YOUR TIME.** Michael started by running just 100m barefoot and took three months to build up to 10km. "If you've been a heel-striker all your life, you have to transition slowly to build strength in the calf and foot muscles," Dr Lieberman says.
- **LISTEN TO YOUR BODY.** "Whatever you're doing, if it feels